

## **Hunting Strangers and Stranger Things by Prince Pondincherry**

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**Summary:** The students at Crossroads Academy study to hunt down the monsters known as "Strangers" which plague our world. Three students are assigned to investigate the suspicious circumstances in Hawkins, Indiana. The things they discover are even stranger than what they expected. (Crossover with the web serial Heretical Edge.)

# **1. Investigation 1-01**

## **Chapter 1**

**Crossroads Academy, Monday, November 6th, 7 p.m.**

Professor Dare spoke to the gathered members of the Investigation track. "Our first order of business today is the announcement of a group project. You will be split into teams of three, each of which will be given a briefing from the Bow Street Runners about potential Stranger activity. The Runners will collect only the initial information used to decide the potential activity is worth investigating. Your task will be to complete the investigation, whether by interviewing Bystanders, examining the scene in person, or any other techniques you have learned.

"Because you are students in your first term, you will be given cases judged least likely to be dangerous, to you and to Bystanders. This means that the majority of you will likely not encounter a Stranger at all, but will instead have to compile evidence and present a compelling argument that Stranger activity is not involved. You should see this not as a disappointment but a good thing—no Stranger activity means no chance of Strangers harming Bystanders. It will also be a good learning experience, as judging whether or not Strangers are involved in a situation is one of the primary tasks of the Runners, and it will serve you well to learn to recognize the signs of a mundane situation."

Koren Fellows raised her hand, and Professor Dare called on her. "What do we do if there's no Stranger involved, but something bad is still happening? I'm not going to stand by and let somebody get raped or murdered in front of me because the person doing it is human."

"In the unfortunate case that the situation the Runners have identified is still a bad situation despite involving no Strangers, standard procedure is to alert the Bystander authorities. The Runners have contacts in the police forces, FBI, CIA, and other agencies through which they often pass on information, but feel free to contact the authorities yourself, as long as you can do it without making them suspicious and causing more problems down the line. It may be

difficult to explain the situation as a teenager who is not in the system, if you are Heretic-born, or to explain what you are doing so far from home, if you are Bystander-kin. In such a case, you may contact the Runners when you turn in your report, and they will pass on the information for you."

Koren spoke up again, not bothering to raise her hand this time (although she did wait for a pause in the professor's speech). "Yeah, that's great and all, but what if someone is being murdered right in front of me?"

There was a crinkle around Professor Dare's eyes, as if she wanted to smile but felt obligated not to. "We at Crossroads are monster-hunters, not vigilantes, but of course you will not be punished if the only way you have to protect someone is by acting directly. We simply ask that you not go looking for excuses to directly intervene when more legitimate channels are available, and that you not expose Bystanders to Heretic magic or abilities."

"What? Why the hell not?" Koren exclaimed, trying to moderate her language but only succeeding in kicking it down a notch from what she really wanted to say.

"Wait, it's not like anybody would know after the Bystander Effect makes the Bystanders forget, anyway," realized Sandoval Mason, aka Sands.

"Rules are rules," Professor Dare said mysteriously, allowing herself a tiny smirk this time. "Now! Are there any other questions?"

"How will we be graded on the project?" asked Rudolph Parsons, a laid-back boy who always seemed to do exactly the required amount of work—no more and no less.

"I will hand out copies of the rubric now." Professor Dare laid her hand down on the stack of papers sitting on the table next to her. A second later, it had disappeared, and one sheet of paper was now resting on each student's desk. "In general terms, you will be graded on the completeness of your investigation, your discretion when dealing with Bystanders, the coherency of your logical reasoning, and your success in addressing whatever situation you encounter.

Regarding outside help, this project will follow a similar grading scheme to your team hunts. The Runner initially assigned to your investigation, along with myself, will be on-call. If you do not need to ask for our help, you will gain a small point bonus, but if you do need our help and fail to ask for it, your grade will be marked down significantly. If you encounter a situation you cannot handle and innocents die because you failed to ask for help, you will fail the assignment unless you have a very good explanation for your decision. It is true that we will not be holding your hands on this mission both as a learning experience and so the Runners can examine situations more likely to be dangerous. However, your safety and the safety of innocents is our top priority, and you will not jeopardize that out of pride." They spent several more minutes going over the details of the rubric and what exactly would be expected of them on this project before Professor Dare chose the teams by selecting students' names out of a hat. "Koren Fellows, Sarah Mason, and Travis Colby."

One look at her twin sister's face, and Sands saw all that she needed to know—Scout wasn't ready to be split up with her yet, not on something this big. And truthfully, Sands wasn't comfortable with it either. She squeezed her sister's hand and whispered, "As soon as we get the chance, we'll talk to her about switching groups, alright?" Scout replied with a thumb up.

When the groups had all been selected, Professor Dare announced, "Because of the specific nature of this assignment, there are not enough cases that fit the criteria for all of your groups to start tonight. I will hand out those we do have, and you will be excused from classes until you complete your assignment. The rest of you will maintain your normal schedules until a case comes to my attention." Professor Dare handed out the available cases, speaking briefly with each group before sending them off to gather supplies. Fortunately, the groups Sands and Scout were in did not yet receive a case. When Professor Dare was done speaking with the last group that had received a case, Sands and Scout stood up and approached her.

"Professor, we'd like to talk to you about the groups."

Unfortunately, Koren was sitting in earshot. "What, do you have a problem with working with me, Mason?" she challenged.

Professor Dare eyed the twins disapprovingly. "I will not switch the groups based on a schoolyard disagreement. Working professionally with people you dislike personally is an essential skill for a Heretic, and I would not deprive you of the chance to learn."

Sands said, "It's not that, it's...well, you know how Scout is. We just don't think it's a good idea for us to be split up on an investigation like this."

The Professor gave a small sigh before speaking directly to Scout. "I had hoped to give you the opportunity to expand your comfort zone a little in a controlled setting. Although it will not be impossible, you will find it difficult to be an effective investigator without being able to talk to others yourself. You will not always be able to rely on your sister."

Scout whispered intently in Sands's ear. Sands turned to her sister and whispered back, "Are you sure?" Receiving a nod, she turned to Professor Dare. "Scout says she's working on it, but she doesn't think being split up for an entire investigation is a good idea just yet. But we promise to try to split up for at least part of the assignment if we are assigned to the same group."

Professor Dare considered their proposal before nodding. "Very well. In that case, the two of you should have no problem being in the same group as Koren."

Sands held back a grimace. She hadn't lied; Scout didn't want to switch groups just because she disliked Koren, but the fact was, neither Mason liked her. Koren had an abrasive personality, to put it lightly. Still, they could tell that this was the best offer they were going to get. "Sure, no problem," Sands said, while Scout nodded.

**Crossroads Academy, Friday, November 10th, 7 p.m.**

"Koren, Sands, Scout. This case came in during dinner," Professor Dare said, handing Sands a file folder. "Look it over, come up with a plan, gather any equipment you may need, and return here."

The three girls went and found a place to sit and examine their case. Sands opened up the folder. "Let's see what we've got." She started to

read aloud. "Suspicious Deaths in Hawkins, Indiana. On the night of Sunday, November 5th, hundreds of homes in East Hawkins had surges and power outages. The same night, 12-year-old Will Byers vanished as he rode his bicycle home from a friend's house. The bicycle was found abandoned in the woods next to the road, and a search party was formed on Monday, November 6th. The boy's mother, Joyce Byers, claims to have received a phone call from her son. Although she admitted she could only hear breathing, she claimed to recognize it as her son's.

"On Tuesday, November 7th, local diner owner Benny Hammond was found dead, apparently having committed suicide. The timing is suspicious, as it was the first suicide in Hawkins in years.

"A party Tuesday night was the last time anybody has seen 17-year-old Barbara Holland. Her car was eventually found at the bus station, and the local authorities believe she ran off, but the timing is again suspicious.

"On Wednesday, November 8th, a state trooper found the body of Will Byers in the quarry, ruling that his cause of death was the fall from a great height into the water.

"On Thursday, November 9th, Joyce Byers and her elder son, Jonathan Byers, had a public argument where Joyce was heard to emphatically claim that the body the state troopers discovered was not her son, and she knew he was still alive. Also on Thursday, it was discovered that locals Dale Jones and Henry Anderson disappeared on a hunting trip.

"In conclusion, while Joyce Byers may have had a psychotic break due to her son's disappearance, as seems to be the prevailing belief, the abnormally large number of deaths and disappearances all at one time may be indicative that this situation is worth a second look. Joyce's belief that her son is alive with no proof and no way to explain away the dead body is the sort of thing that may slip past the Bystander Effect. That said, it is something of a long shot, so this case is of the lowest priority."

The three girls looked at each other for a second. Then, Sands said, "It does seem suspicious, but there's barely a hint of Stranger

involvement. So...I guess this will probably be a dud. Woo hoo." Sure, Professor Dare had said to be glad that there were no Strangers hurting anybody, but Sands had kind of been hoping for a fight.

Surprisingly, Scout and Koren were united in shaking their heads "no". Scout leaned in to whisper in Sands's ear, "Memory magic."

"Yes, well, I get that the Bystander Effect could be messing up Joyce Byers's memory, but usually it's more thorough than that. There could be memory magic, but I'm not really seeing it."

"No, that makes perfect sense," Koren said. "Some Stranger could be attacking the people and leaving excuses for the deaths, but it didn't wipe Joyce Byers's memory correctly, and she still remembers that her son is only taken, not killed. Or whatever. The point is, there's a lot of things it could be."

"You're right," Sands said. "But for now let's focus on getting there." She looked through some of the papers in the file beyond just the summary. "This says there's a bus stop downtown. We can have the Pathmaker drop us off there and say we took a bus in. Just let me check the bus times so it's reasonable," she said, shuffling through the files some more.

"Nah, let's just drive," Koren said. "I don't know how far the Pathmaker location in Indiana is from this little town—Hawkins, that's right—but it can't be too far. Indiana's not that big of a state. Plus, we'll probably want a car to get around better once we're there. There has to be some car we can borrow or rent, right?"

Sands looked at her in some surprise. "Uh, yeah, there's a pool of cars Heretics can take out on missions at each location on Earth. Dad's taken us on trips in them before. But more importantly, you can drive?"

"Yeah, of course I can drive! I got my license as soon as I turned 16. You can't? Neither of you?"

"It didn't seem that important, and we had better things to do!" Koren looked at her skeptically. "Okay, we both agreed it was useful, but we'll have plenty of time to learn to drive whenever, and it would

have been too much of a hassle to have to be escorted to Earth all the time for driving lessons and practice. It's not like we needed to go anywhere with a car!"

"It's still pretty lame," Koren said bluntly.

Sands started to bristle in anger, but Scout put her hand on her sister's shoulder and pointed to her wrist. Sands took a breath, calming herself. "Right, we only have so much time. We need to get there and rent a room somewhere for the night before everybody is asleep. But first we need to figure out what we're going to bring."

"They were searching for the lost boy in the woods, so we'll definitely want flashlights to look around tonight," Koren said. "And of course a few changes of clothes so we can blend in."

"Maybe we should wear our uniforms," Sands suggested. "Like Professor Dare says, we need to lie about who we are, but we're too young to pretend to be police, so what if we take a page out of Flick's book and say we're reporters for a school newspaper?" Scout gave a thumbs up, and Koren somewhat reluctantly agreed that it might be a good idea. The three girls brainstormed some more, dispersed to gather supplies, and met back by Professor Dare, who took them into the Pathfinder building and sent them on their way to Indiana.

### **Author's Notes:**

This chapter was to set up the plot and introduce the crossover characters. They'll be getting to Hawkins next chapter, so there will be actual *Stranger Things* characters in that one.

*Heretical Edge* is a web serial written by Cerulean about (among many, many other things-it's a long story) a society of monster-hunters known as Heretics who investigate unusual occurrences and hunt the monsters they call Strangers to protect Bystanders from them. A bit over a year after I started reading it, I came across the amazing TV show *Stranger Things*, about a series of unusual occurrences caused by a monster hunting people in the small town of Hawkins, Indiana. I couldn't resist combining the two.

Anyway, this should be understandable to fans of either series,



although you won't get a couple of references here and there. I don't think this is a problem, since a lot of the story is about the characters from one series learning about the other, so you should fit right in with the characters from the series you follow. That said, the story will primarily be following three Heretics (Sands, Scout, and Koren), so while *Stranger Things* characters will feature heavily, you should be prepared for that. I don't think there should be any major spoilers for *Heretical Edge* at all.

If you haven't read *Heretical Edge*, it's freely available online, and while the writing's not quite up to par with *Stranger Things*, it's still excellent, and faaar better than my meager attempts at writing. Plus, it's full of the same sort of mysterious monsters, smart and resilient characters, and emotional character interactions that make *Stranger Things* great, so you should really give it a try if you liked *Stranger Things*.

Oh, and for any *Heretical Edge* fans too lazy to look up the date, this takes place in the week between the Meregan trip and the time Professor Dare put Flick, Koren, Vanessa, and Rudolph in a group for a history project.

(A note on timing): I moved up *Stranger Things* by more than three decades, but only had to change the date by one day to get it to line up with *Heretical Edge*. I think it's not unrealistic for the show to take place now and not in the 80s if we assume a few minor changes like the following:

It has to be an area with spotty cell reception to justify the use of the radios, although they'd probably use smaller versions than in the show.

Instead of punch card readers for the door locks, they'd have magnetic strips.

Film isn't totally gone, so Jonathan could still be developing pictures with film.

"Should I Stay or Should I Go" could easily still be Will's favorite song, since it's not exactly unknown now.

## 2. Investigation 1-02

### Chapter 2

Hawkins, Indiana, 9:50 p.m.

At the time the girls were arriving, their first priority was to find someplace to sleep. There were two real options—a bed and breakfast and a couple shifty-looking motels with average reviews on Yelp. Sands and Koren wanted to stay at the bed and breakfast, which looked much more pleasant online, but Scout reasonably pointed out that a motel would be much less likely to ask uncomfortable questions when a bunch of visiting teenagers stayed out late at night, so they chose one and went there.

The motel wasn't exactly dirty or creepy or anything—it was just somewhat worn-down, and a far cry from the dorm building back at Crossroads. But they would make do. Using the budget Crossroads had provided, they rented a room with two beds. (The twins would have no problem sharing.) The proprietor at the front desk was clearly curious, and Koren decided to take advantage of this to gather some information while the twins were bringing their luggage up to their room.

"What are three young gals like you doing visiting our small town at a place like this?" asked the woman, who had stress lines on her face and the first streaks of grey in her hair.

Koren leaned forward conspiratorially. "Oh, we just heard some rumors about what's been going on in Hawkins and thought, 'Hey, it's the weekend, let's take a look.'" Then she carefully judged the woman's reaction.

The woman tut-tutted and said, disapprovingly, "Don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, now," but Koren got the impression that she was saying it more for form's sake than because she meant it. So she pushed on, bringing up their cover story.

"Oh, we won't, but I'd say our nose *does* belong here. You see, we're looking for a good story for our school newspaper, and this sounds

like it could be good. We thought we might interview some of the people involved in the search party—oh, did you go?"

"No, these old bones wouldn't let me walk around that much, you understand."

"Of course! Don't worry about it, I'm sure there's plenty of people we can talk to. Maybe we'll even talk to Joyce Byers herself. There's got to be some reason she was sure her son was still alive one day but went to his funeral the next."

"Oh, you heard about that?"

"Only a little bit; I didn't really hear the details."

"It was a whole big thing! Joyce and her boy Jonathan were yelling at each other in the town square. Joyce kept saying she knew she sounded crazy, but she didn't care, she wasn't going to stop until she got her son back." The woman shook her head sadly. "Poor thing. The stress is really getting to her." Straightening up, she pointed at Koren. "Now don't you be going and making fun of the poor woman!"

"That's not what we're here for! But surely it can't hurt to listen to what she has to say? And if it makes a good story, even better."

"Well, I suppose."

Sands and Scout came down the stairs. "Koren, you ready?" Sands asked.

"We just finished talking, so I'm ready to go," Koren said.

"Go? Where are you going at this time of night? It's after 10 o'clock!"

"We thought we'd look around the woods where they were searching for a bit, get an idea of what it was like to be in the search party, maybe take a few pictures. Do you think you could tell us where they were searching?" Koren asked, unfolding a map on the counter.

"They found that poor boy's bike right here, and concentrated the search on that area." Pointing to another point of the map, the woman said, "But this here is the quarry where they found the body."

"Thanks," Koren said as she folded up the map and walked out the door, the twins following.

"Be careful, girls!" the woman called after them.

"Don't worry, we will," Sands said, flashing her a cheery smile.

"So, you find anything out with your gossiping?" Sands asked.

"Information gathering," Koren said pointedly. "And she was pretty useless, but at least she gave us a place for me to drop you off so you can start looking around. It's pretty close to the Byers house, just like I said it would be. I knew a 12-year-old wouldn't be biking that far from home. It's too late for you to go try the reporter thing with Joyce without looking like a total creep."

Scout leaned forward from the back seat to whisper in Sands's ear. Sands said, "Scout can use her enhanced hearing to try to listen for anything useful."

"Like I said. Total creep."

"Hey! We're not the ones going to dig up a grave!"

"I told you, we're here because somebody's claiming a dead body isn't actually a dead body. What kind of investigators would we be if we didn't check for ourselves? Now pay attention to that map, it's hard enough to watch the road and see street signs in this darkness. You better not make me miss our turn." The report on Hawkins had mentioned that the town was far enough from the rest of civilization that cell service didn't reach there yet, so the girls made a point of bringing their own magical communicators and a lot of maps and looking up the addresses of places like the Byers house and the cemetery before leaving Crossroads. The downside was, of course, that they were stuck navigating the old-fashioned way.

After a little bit more sniping between Sands and Koren and a lot more tense silence punctuated by Sands giving the occasional direction, they arrived at the location the motel proprietor had pinpointed as the start of the search for Will Byers. Sands and Scout grabbed their gear and got out, and Koren drove off to the cemetery.

When Koren was gone, Scout looked at her map until she found the shortest way through the woods to the Byers house. Then, she said quietly, "You hunt. I'll go listen."

"Alright, sounds good. Let's try to check in every fifteen minutes at least, and I'll let you know if I find anything interesting." Scout nodded her agreement and headed off.

Looking around with her flashlight for illumination, Sands examined the area around her more closely for clues, but she had a couple of problems. Firstly, their information wasn't extremely precise, so she had no real way of knowing whether or not this was the exact place Will had ditched his bike by the side of the road. Secondly, it had been several days since then, and a massive search party had tromped through the woods, covering up any evidence. Maybe if all three of them came back in the daytime they could find something, but even then, Sands was skeptical. Still, she had nothing better to do at the moment, since the rest of their potential lines of investigation either were being pursued by her classmates or involved talking to people, which they couldn't do until the next morning. Sands reported her lack of findings to the others and expanded her fruitless search into the forest slightly.

A couple of minutes later, Scout reported over the communicator, "Yelling."

"What? Is someone yelling in the Byers house?"

"No. In the forest. South of you, west of me."

"I'll go check it out. You going to come at it from the other direction?"

"Yes." Keeping her eyes and ears peeled as best as she could in the darkness lit only by the beam of her flashlight, Sands jogged into the forest at a steady pace.

As far as she could tell from the map, Scout had nearly made it to the Byers house when she picked up a very faint sound with her superhuman hearing. She had stopped moving to quiet her feet and listened intently. When she had heard it again, it had sounded like yelling, so she had called Sands before heading off towards the sound

herself. She had a small amount of superhuman stamina, which let her keep up a light jog without getting too tired, but she couldn't run too fast in the dark through the forest without risking tripping, which would definitely slow her down.

Before too long, she was close enough that she could hear actual words instead of just distant yelling noises. It was a male voice yelling, "Nancy!" As she got closer, she could hear the desperation behind his words as he yelled for Nancy, and she wanted nothing more at that moment than to run as fast as she could, but she knew she shouldn't risk tripping, so she carefully maintained the same quick pace. Finally, Scout found the source of the voice just in time to see a teenager with light brown hair drag a brown-haired girl about Scout's age out of a slime-filled hole in a tree. As soon as the girl was out, the hole in the tree closed right before their eyes.

"Found them," Scout said into the communicator pin clipped to her shirt. Then, switching to the whole group channel, she said, "Found magic."

"What? Magic where?" Koren asked.

"Are you alright?" Sands asked.

"I'm fine. Busy."

"Good. I'll try to find you," Sands said, "but I don't know how well I'll be able to in a forest with no landmarks I know."

Meanwhile, the boy and the girl had been hugging each other tightly, the boy whispering comforting words as the girl sobbed into his shoulder. Finally, their breathing steadied and they pulled apart and looked up to see Scout. She froze in sudden terror.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the boy asked.

Scout was paralyzed, unable to speak. It had been a long time, almost longer than she could remember, since she had been put on the spot like this, left on her own to answer demanding questions from a complete stranger. The fact that she had to try to come up with a believable lie made it even worse.

Trying to gather up her courage, she reminded herself of her promise to Professor Dare that she would try to do something on her own this mission. She also reminded herself to focus on the mission—the boy and girl in front of her were the only witnesses to whatever strange magic involved the girl needing to be dragged out of a slimy, self-closing hole in a tree. The way the Bystander Effect worked, if they hadn't forgotten about the unnatural occurrence already, they would very soon, and so there was no time to wait for Sands to find them. Scout would have to interrogate them herself.

First, she answered one of the boy's questions. Pointing at him, she said, "Yelling." Then, she turned to the girl and forced out the words, "Why were you in the tree?"

They exchanged glances, clearly trying to decide how much to tell her. Then, the girl said, "There was a monster."

"We were hunting it," the boy said.

"Heretics?" Scout asked in surprise.

"What? Heretics? Is that what you said?" the boy asked.

"What does that mean?" the girl asked.

Scout's mind was racing. They said they were hunting a monster, but they had apparently never heard of "Heretics" in the context of "monster hunters." What did that mean? Scout shook off her confusion. She'd have to worry about it later. "What did it look like?" she asked.

"The monster?" the girl asked. Scout nodded. "It was tall, thin," the girl began shakily. "It had clawed hands, and...and no face. Just a giant mouth full of teeth." She shuddered, and the boy threw an arm over her shoulder and pulled her closer until she was calm again.

Then, the boy said, "Actually, we have a photo." He pulled a picture out of his coat and showed it to Scout in the light of a flashlight. Unfortunately, the picture was blurry and vague and didn't add much detail. Scout thought of all the Strangers she had heard of or learned about, but she couldn't think of any that fit that exact description or

looked quite like what she saw in the picture. Or, rather, the description and image were vague enough that she could think of a number that could possibly fit. She'd have to talk to Sands about it later.

Scout crouched down to examine the tree the girl had come out of. As far as she could tell, the hole was completely closed up with no sign it had ever been there. She even tried pushing some magic into it just to see if anything would happen, but nothing did.

Oh well. She should at least get a record of the area. Keeping her back to the other two so they couldn't see what she was doing, Scout pulled a small silver and violet orb about the size of a golf ball from her pocket. She manipulated the Panoptic Analysis Window System, or PAWS, setting it up to cloak and scan the area within a five-foot diameter of her location, going all the way to the top of the tree, before returning to her pocket. If there was a clue she was missing, they would be able to examine it later.

Once the PAWS had cloaked, Scout turned back around and saw the other two looking at her curiously. "Closed," she said, gesturing at the missing opening in the tree.

"Yeah. Thank God I got back before it closed, or I'd still be stuck on the other side," the girl said.

"Other side?" Scout asked.

"It was like a slimy, disgusting version of the forest we're in, with little floating...seeds or something in the air. And the monster was there eating a deer we saw it take."

There was an awkward silence when the girl finished her account. As with any awkward situation Scout found herself in, this awkwardness multiplied inside her brain until she could do nothing but stand there and think about how awkward this was.

"So, who are you, and why were you in the woods to hear me yelling?" the boy asked. Scout found that now that the urgent task of gathering information was done, she found it nearly impossible to speak up. Finally, she managed to say one word.



"Reporter."

Thankfully, the girl was apparently able to piece together what she meant from the word and the school uniform. "Are you a reporter for a school newspaper or something?" Scout felt a bit hesitant to lie, but she still nodded. "And you came out here at night all alone?" Scout gave a helpless little shrug before realizing what the second part of the question had been. She shook her head and pointed at her best guess for her sister's direction.

"Sister."

"Your sister's out here too?" The girl said. Scout nodded.

"We should go find her. It's not safe," the boy said. Scout laughed a little internally at the thought that these Bystanders would be able to protect her sister, but didn't object. Finding her sister seemed like a good idea. And anyway, she wasn't entirely sure these *were* Bystanders. The Bystander Effect *still* didn't seem to have modified their memories. They didn't trigger her Stranger sense, but not every Stranger did. On the other hand, they looked human, so Scout thought it was more likely that they were somehow Heretics who didn't know anything about the Knowledge. The only times Scout had heard of the Bystander Effect taking this long to work on Bystanders was when they were still actively experiencing an abnormal situation, such as being flown around on a spaceship, but nothing like that was happening here as far as she could tell. They were just walking through the woods! Scout already had her senses peeled for any hint of her sister, but she made sure to pay attention to any potential danger as well.

### 3. Investigation 1-03

#### Chapter 3

Koren put aside her curiosity about the magic Scout had found as she pulled to a stop just outside the cemetery and put the car in park. Fortunately, there were no walls or guards to deal with, and the cemetery wasn't extremely large. Unfortunately, it was right on the back side of a church with no cover to hide what she was doing if the pastor or anybody else came out. She'd just have to hope that it was late enough that nobody would come outside and see her.

After a quick search of the cemetery, Koren found the grave of Will Byers. Then, she went back to the car to pick up one of the shovels they had brought. As she returned to the grave, she reminded herself why she had to do this. Like she had told the others, they'd be poor investigators if they didn't check the central claim that had brought them here. On the other hand, maybe now that Scout had discovered magic, it wasn't necessary? Still, it was best to be thorough, and in the absence of more detail about what magic Scout had found, digging up this body was the right thing to do. No matter how disrespectful it seemed. And the other two girls certainly weren't going to do it, so Koren had to. She looked around once more to make sure nobody was watching, then took a deep breath and plunged the shovel into the soil.

Finally! Sands saw several flashlight beams moving in the distance, so she pointed her light at them to get their attention and headed that way. Sure enough, as she approached, she found Scout walking with a boy and a girl about their age. She waved and called out, "There you are!" They kept walking until they were more in talking range than yelling range. Then, Sands figured it was time for introductions. "Hi, I'm Sands, and Scout is my sister. We're here for our school newspaper; we heard about the missing kid too late to join the search party, but we thought we'd take a look around and see what it was like anyway."

The boy scowled and took a step closer to her. "My brother going missing is serious! I can't believe you think it's just something to get a good story out of!"

Sands raised her hands in surrender, "Whoa, hey, we'd help if we could, but we heard about it too late. Wait a minute, missing? I thought they said he was dead."

The boy seemed to slump into himself. "I don't know any more. We had a funeral, but my mom said the...the body wasn't him. I didn't believe her, but then I got a picture of a monster, and then we came out here looking for it and it almost got Nancy, so *something* strange is going on. Maybe he is still alive."

"We'll help any way we can," Sands promised. "Anyway, I never got your names. Are you Nancy?" she asked the girl.

"Oh, sorry," said the girl, who was covered in drying slime and still looked somewhat shell-shocked. "Yes, I'm Nancy Wheeler, and this is Jonathan Byers. And did you say you are Sands and this is Scout?"

"Yes, that's us."

Meanwhile, Scout had walked closer to Sands. She tugged on her sister's arm and whispered in her ear, "They remember." Sands thought about that for a second before realizing with a jolt—they *had* remembered encountering a monster, hadn't they? But they weren't triggering her Stranger sense, so were they Heretics?

"Have you ever heard of Heretics who hunt Strangers?" Sands asked.

"No, why? Your sister asked about Heretics too," Jonathan said.

"I'm just surprised you remember being running into the monster," Sands admitted. "Okay, this is going to be a weird question, so bear with me. Have you ever mixed your blood with a monster? Like maybe you made one bleed, but you were also bleeding, and you got its blood all over your cut? Or, like, it was biting you and you tore out one of its teeth?"

Jonathan and Nancy looked at Sands like she was totally insane. "What? No!" Nancy proclaimed.

"Why would you even think that?" Jonathan asked, sounding a mix between confused and horrified.

"Well, Bystanders—non-Heretics, I mean—can't remember running

into monsters, so I thought maybe you were Heretics without realizing. And mixing your blood with a Stranger is one way to become a Heretic."

"What is a Heretic? And mixing your blood with a Stranger? What are you talking about," Jonathan asked, sounding exasperated.

"We're really not supposed to talk about it," Sands said. But then again, they were already mixed up in this if they could remember fighting a monster, so it wouldn't really be fair to keep them in the dark, would it? Sands decided to try to explain at least the basics of the Heretic world to them.

However, to her confusion, the Bystander Effect *did* still seem to be affecting them. She could talk about "monsters" and "hunting monsters" in general, or anything specific about the situation they had found themselves in with that weird tree portal and the monster that went through it, but any time she tried to talk about Crossroads, Strangers, or what Heretics did more generally, Jonathan and Nancy either wouldn't understand or would forget immediately. Eventually, Sands concluded that whatever was going on here seemed to be ignoring the Bystander Effect locally, but hadn't actually brought Jonathan and Nancy into the Knowledge.

That was interesting enough that Sands filled Koren in on what she had found, and the three of them considered telling Professor Dare immediately. On the other hand, nobody was in danger of being hurt by it, so there was no real reason to lose points and bother Professor Dare quite yet. Plus, this was shaping up to be quite interesting, and the girls wanted the chance to solve it themselves.

With that conversation over, Nancy said that she needed to get home before it got even later and her mom got too worried about her. Plus, she really wanted to clean herself up from all the slime from the portal. She just hoped she'd be able to get in her house and into her shower before her mom saw her. Scout (through Sands) tried to reassure her that she could listen and make sure her mom wasn't somewhere she could see her, but it turned out that the Heretics' powers were one of the things the Bystander Effect still worked on, so they couldn't bring it up. That didn't mean they couldn't work around it by not letting Nancy into the house until her mother was out of the

way, just that they couldn't tell Nancy about the plan.

While the four of them were walking, Koren spoke to Sands and Scout over their magical communicators. "It's not him. The body's a fake. A surprisingly realistic-looking fake, but still a fake." Sands relayed the information to Jonathan. His first response was, of course, outrage.

"You had your friend dig up my brother's grave?!"

"We didn't want to, but we needed to know if your mom was right," Sands said. "And it wasn't actually him in there anyway."

Jonathan started to say, "That's not..." but Nancy interrupted him, putting her hand on his shoulder calmly and saying,

"Jonathan."

They looked at each other for a second before Jonathan exhaled, turned, and continued walking. "Let's get going." The others followed, but Sands had to speak up.

"Wait! Aren't you going to go tell your mom?"

"I don't want to worry her. She's been through so much already."

"Worry her? You don't think she should know that her son might still be alive?"

Jonathan stopped walking again and turned aggressively. "Might! We still don't know where he is or even if he's dead somewhere we haven't found yet! I don't want to get her hopes up before we're sure."

Sands had to take a few deep breaths to calm herself. Clearly she'd been spoiled by how much Flick shared information with her team if this was how people normally acted. Still, she wasn't just going to let it go. "Okay, I get it, you're her son, so it's your choice. But I really think you should tell her. If your mom was so convinced that Will was alive that she yelled at you in the middle of town about it yesterday, I really doubt she's just given up on him today. All you'd be doing is confirming that she's not crazy. And I'm sure it's just eating her up inside, wondering whether she might actually be crazy,

or if her son's still alive but she doesn't know how to find him. Believe me, I know how bad it feels to have your entire view of the world challenged, and I really think she deserves to know for sure that she's not insane."

Jonathan just stared at Sands for a few seconds, thinking things through. Then, he turned slightly to look at Nancy. She nodded a bit and said, "I think she's right. Your mom deserves to know."

Jonathan nodded. "Alright. But you should keep going. You've got to get back to your house before it's too late, right?" Nancy suddenly looked really uncomfortable. "What is it?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't...really want to be alone right now," Nancy said. Sands and Scout looked at each other, and Scout whispered in Sands's ear.

"Scout can go with you to your house," Sands offered.

Nancy didn't seem too reassured by the offer of the shy, petite girl as a bodyguard, but eventually she accepted, and the two groups split up again.

Scout and Nancy stood not too far from their destination, but Nancy had stopped before she got there. Scout could see she was terrified, unwilling to split up. So she did what she could to reassure the girl, pulling her massive sniper rifle out of the extradimensional storage space on her belt and saying, "I'll keep watch. I won't let it get you."

Whether it was because she was traumatized, tired, or just befuddled as the Bystander Effect kept her from wondering where the gun had come from, Nancy didn't have it in her to react with more than just dull shock. "That's a big gun."

Scout just tried to reassure her. "I'll keep you safe." A second later, Nancy nodded and continued sneaking into her house to take a shower. Scout watched her go inside before turning and jogging lightly back into the forest. A short ways away, she lay down on the ground and settled into a little alcove she had spotted on the way in. Dirt walls shielded her on three sides, and a fallen tree trunk concealed her from the top. With her left hand, she flicked a switch near the front of the gun. Then, she aimed into the air above the tree

line, turned a dial to adjust the focus of her shot, and pulled the trigger. It was too dark to see the slight flicker of light in the air that heralded the formation of a portal.

Looking through her scope, Scout could see from the point-of-view of the portal. She adjusted the dials on her gun until she was aiming for a point directly above the Wheeler house, then fired again. A puff of practically invisible energy left the barrel of her gun, traveled through the first portal to the spot she had aimed at, and formed a new portal. Continuing on from there, Scout set up a network of portals around the Wheeler house so she could see anything that approached it from any direction.

It wasn't long before her enhanced hearing caught the sound of three teens driving a car up the street to the house, music blaring. Scout switched viewpoints until she could clearly see the approaching car. The driver stopped the car, got out, and approached the Wheeler house. Scout zoomed in on him, and he looked human, so she let him pass. When he started climbing onto the roof of the garage and into Nancy's window, Scout activated the communicator pin and said, "Someone's climbing into Nancy's room. Looks human." Sands offered to come help, but Koren asked where the house was. When Scout told her the address, she revealed that she was almost driving and was near there anyways, so she could come help. In the meantime, Scout kept a close eye on the strange boy in Nancy's room through her network of portals. He wasn't doing anything too suspicious, like stealing anything, so Scout thought it would be safe to let him be for a minute or too. Nancy wasn't in the room, so she was probably taking a shower. If she came back before Koren arrived, and the boy caused trouble, Scout could always just shoot him.

Koren pulled up in front of the house, stopped her car, and got out, checking the address one more time to make sure she was at the right place. "Which window?" she asked Scout.

"Over the garage, on the left."

Koren took a step towards the house before she heard, "Hey!" She turned to look back towards the street, where there was a car with a boy and a girl in it. "Who the hell are you, and what do you think you're doing here?" the boy asked rudely.

"That's none of your fucking business, asshole." Then she turned around and kept walking to the house.

"Hey, don't turn your back on me!" the asshole said. Koren refused to dignify him by acknowledging him and kept walking. "Get back here! I'm talking to you!" There were two door slams, presumably as they got out of the care.

"Following you," Scout reported.

"Yeah, I heard," Koren muttered back. "Just let them lay a hand on me, we'll see what happens." But apparently they didn't expect her to keep ignoring them, or at the least they didn't move quickly enough to reach her before she made it to the house and started climbing up, using one hand to fold her skirt under her so the asswipe wouldn't get an eyeful. She slid the window open and crawled through, coming to her feet to stand face-to-face with a somewhat-handsome brown-haired boy.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in Nancy's room?" he asked in an urgent whisper.

"I think that's my line," Koren said with a wry smile.

"I am Nancy's...friend, and I'm worried about her. I've never even **seen you** before!"

"What kind of friend sneaks into a girl's room at night? Because let me tell you now, the movies may say it's romantic, but it's actually really creepy."

"Nancy didn't have a problem with it the other day! And that's not the point!"

The door swung open to reveal Nancy, her hair damp from the shower, dressed in pajamas. "Steve? What's going on?"

"Nancy! Who is this?"

"I'm Koren. Sands and Scout are my classmates. Scout saw somebody climbing in your window and sent me to make sure it was okay. So you know this guy?"



"Uh, yeah, this is Steve."

"Sands' and 'Scout?' Are those supposed to be names?"

"I know, right? Okay, 'Sands' is a better name for a girl than 'Sandoval,' but I don't know what Scout has against 'Sarah.'"

"And 'Koren' isn't much better."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with my name! Just because you have the most boring-ass, vanilla name possible. I mean 'Steve,' really."

"Quiet! You'll wake someone!" Nancy hissed. She stepped inside the room and closed the door. "Let's just sit down and talk this out." They all found somewhere and sat down. "Steve, Koren, Sands, and Scout are in town reporting for their school newspaper, and I told them I'd tell them a little about what's been going on. Koren, thank you for checking up on me, and tell Scout I said thank you for watching out for me when she happened to see something suspicious, but I'm okay now that Steve's here, so you two should probably get back to—wherever you're staying."

"Are you sure?" Koren asked.

"Well...Steve, why *are* you here?"

"You were acting really weird earlier today, and, well..."

"Just because I didn't want to go to a movie with you doesn't mean I was acting weird! I told you, I just didn't feel up to going out!"

"That didn't stop you from meeting some strangers from another town!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I just, ughh." Steve wiped his hand down his face as he tried to find the words. "Dammit Nancy, I was worried about you!" They both sat there, staring intently, until Koren coughed to break the awkwardness.

"I'm okay, Steve," Nancy said. "But...I wouldn't mind the company if you want to sleep here tonight. It's just, with everything going on, I don't really want to be alone."

"Yeah, sure, of course, just let me tell Tommy and Carol to go." Steve stuck his head out the window to loudly whisper to his friends outside.

Meanwhile, Koren moved until she was sitting right next to Nancy on the bed. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. Thank Scout for me for watching me, but...I know Steve. I just met you."

"If you're sure."

"I am. You two should go meet up with Sands and Jonathan." A few seconds later, Steve finished talking to his friends and pulled his head back in the window.

"Alright. I'm good to go."

Koren gestured to Nancy in goodbye and started to climb out the window. She saw that the boy (Tommy, apparently) was still down there. Flipping him off with both hands, she hissed, "What, you waiting for a show? Fuck off." He laughed and walked off to join Carol, and Koren climbed down.

## 4. Rescue 2-01

### Chapter 4

"That's Hopper's truck," Jonathan said as he and Sands approached his house. "I wonder what he's doing here."

"Who's Hopper?" But Jonathan had sped up at the sight of his house, and he was already opening the door and going inside. Sands followed him in. The first thing she noticed was the absurd number of strings of Christmas lights with unscrewed bulbs hung from the walls of the living room and hallway. One of the walls in the living room had an alphabet painted with large black letters in several rows. Strings of lights lined up with the alphabet rows, one light next to each letter.

Promising herself that she'd look around more if she had the chance, Sands quickly followed Jonathan into the kitchen, where she found a wild-eyed woman with wavy brown hair and a haggard-looking man with a day or two of stubble. Some of their appearance could be attributed to the late hour, but these were obviously very stressed people.

"Jonathan! Who's this?" asked the woman, who was clearly Joyce Byers, the mother of Jonathan and Will. She gestured with her cigarette, and Sands had to make an effort not to make a face at the smell.

"Mom! Oh, this is Sands, she's in town reporting for her school newspaper. But Mom, it wasn't Will's body we buried!"

"We know," Hopper said bluntly, breathing out some smoke from his own cigarette. "What made you change your mind? I thought you were sure it was him."

"You know?" Jonathan asked in surprise. He gave Sands a helpless look, unsure how to answer the question.

Sands mentally sighed and decided to bite the bullet. Fortunately, Koren wasn't here to keep herself from being thrown under the bus.

"We heard you didn't think your son was dead, so my classmate decided it would be a good idea to dig up his grave and see for himself."

"You did what?" Hopper reflexively asked in a menacing tone. When he thought about it for another second, he relaxed back into his chair and muttered, "Not that I'm one to talk."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't actually his body, so it's not really disrespectful, is it?" Sands asked.

"Oh, I don't care," Joyce said, tone plaintive and dismissive all at once. "I just want my son back here, safe with me!"

"We'll help you all we can, I promise," Sands said.

Hopper scoffed. "Whatever's going on, it's dangerous. You kids should stay out of it."

"Mom, we can help!" Jonathan protested.

"No! You can stay out of it! I don't need to lose you too because you ran off and did something foolish!" Joyce exclaimed.

"Mom..."

"No!" This was the loudest yell yet. Silence followed as everyone tried to calm down. Sands was a little frustrated, but she understood. In any truly dangerous situation, her father and the other teachers back at Crossroads would have reacted the same way. And to these Bystanders, this monster was clearly very dangerous, so it was entirely reasonable for Joyce Byers not to want her son to get involved. The thing was, Sands was a Heretic, and she wasn't convinced the situation was actually dangerous for her, Scout, or Koren. Even if it was, they were probably better equipped to handle it than the adults in this town, but with the Bystander Effect, there was no way she could tell them that, so when Jonathan gave up the argument and retreated into the living room, she quietly followed and sat down on a couch across from him.

"So what's the story with these Christmas lights?"

"Mom said Will was here, that he could talk to her through the lights," Jonathan said quietly. "She got a phone call, and she said she could recognize him breathing, and then she said he could communicate with her by making the lights flash. So she painted an alphabet on the wall so he could spell out words to her. I thought she was crazy, but...when Nancy was in that other place through the hole in the tree, she said it was like running around in the same forest only creepier, and I could hear her yelling, but I couldn't see her anyway until she came back through the hole. So maybe..."

"Maybe Will was here, in the other place?" Sands finished.

"Yeah. I have no idea why Mom unscrewed all the light bulbs, though." They thought about that quietly for a second, and Sands looked around until she noticed something else weird.

"What's with the hole in the wall?" The front wall of the house had a ragged hole that had been partially patched over by wooden planks.

"Mom said Will was there, he was in the wall, but she couldn't get to him. And then he told her to run, and the monster came out, and when she came back, Will wasn't here anymore. Well, here in the other place. Whatever."

Sands got up to examine the hole more closely. It looked entirely natural, and opened up to the normal outside. "Do you think there was another...portal...here? Scout said the one in the tree closed up like it was never there."

"Yeah, the hole's not from that. My mom went a bit wild and tried to cut her way to Will with an axe. It didn't work."

"Obviously." They stood there quietly for a few more seconds before Sands said, "I'm going to go outside and take a look around from there, if that's okay."

"Yeah, sure," Jonathan said quietly.

Sands walked outside. Taking the PAWS from one of her pockets, she programmed it to scan the house, the shed in the back, and the property up to twenty feet out. Then, she started pacing, trying to

think things through. After a few seconds of that, she returned to the inside of the house and asked Jonathan, "Scout said you were hunting the monster. What did you plan to do if you found it? Were you prepared to fight?"

Jonathan looked around furtively before pulling a small pistol out of his jacket. Sands couldn't help but think that, while it may have been good enough to kill Bystanders, it looked puny compared to the Heretic weapons she was used to. "Nancy had a baseball bat. We practiced a bit, and she was a better shot than me, so we switched while we were out there." After that, they were quiet for a few minutes, Jonathan silently thinking while Sands slowly walked around the room and looked around, more for something to do while she let her mind run than because she actually hoped to find anything.

They were brought out of their drowsy thoughts by the sound of Koren and Scout pulling up in the car outside. Sands suggested Jonathan try to get some sleep and went out to meet her classmates. She explained everything she had learned, using a small portable PAWS viewer to show images of the hole in the wall, the Christmas lights, and the painted alphabet.

When she had finished her explanation, Sands said, "I think we need to hunt the Stranger tonight. I think Will is probably still in this other realm where the Stranger is, and the other disappeared people might be too. The only way we know to get to the other realm is by these temporary portals the Stranger opens when it hunts, so we need to draw it out."

"If you're concerned enough about this missing kid to stay up even later, don't you think we should ask for help?" Koren asked.

"Yeah, you're right. Professor Dare doesn't sleep much anyways."

To their surprise, when they called in and explained the situation to Professor Dare, she had only heard of situations with some similarities, but nothing that matched entirely. She was especially interested in whatever was going on with the Bystander Effect, but she gave them a cryptic warning not to spread that information around too much because "certain unfriendly parties might be very

interested in anything that threatened to weaken it." She promised to look in the library and ask around to see if anybody know more about this type of Stranger and praised them for their quick work and good plan ("You did get lucky, but in my experience, good luck and the skill to capitalize on it are both essential elements of success.") Now that there was a confirmed threat, she asked Risa Kohaku, the small Asian woman in charge of Crossroads' security, to keep an eye on them. The two adults used the Pathfinder building to open a temporary portal. Professor Kohaku stepped through it to Hawkins, and the girls handed over their PAWS recordings to Professor Dare so she could look them over for anything they missed. Although this was a school assignment and she didn't intend to help them more than necessary, she wasn't callous enough to use that as an excuse not to help protect innocents.

"I will try to find a way to duplicate these odd portals with magic," Professor Dare told the students, "but in the meantime, your plan to draw out the Stranger seems to be our best chance of rescuing the Bystanders who were taken. Good luck." Then she closed the Pathfinder-generated portal behind her. Professor Kohaku gave the students magical distress beacons for them to trigger if they needed immediate assistance and told them that, although she was going to be in the motel room they had rented, she would be able to respond almost immediately.

"The Stranger seems to attack only people by themselves, except for that one pair of hunters," Sands said as Koren drove the car back to where they started looking earlier. "But I don't think it's a good idea to split up, not when we might fall asleep. But maybe if only one person is awake at a time, it will still attack."

"I call not it for the first watch," Koren said. Scout volunteered because her increased stamina meant she was the least tired, and her enhanced hearing made her the best choice for a lookout. Unfortunately, it was too dark deep in the forest for her to see anything with her scope portals, but the Stranger only seemed to hunt at night, so she would just have to listen for it and rely on her (baseline-human) night vision to see it if it got too close. The girls grabbed blankets from the car to lie on, headed into the woods, and settled down for the night.

It was nearly 3:30, and Scout was getting ready to wake her sister up so she could get a few hours of sleep before dawn, when she heard something odd. It was a slight stretching sound, like rubber makes when it's been stretched to its limit. Then, there was a quiet tear, and a low, ominous growling. Scout quickly shook Sands and Koren awake, summoned Professor Kohaku, pulled out her sniper rifle, and listened carefully, pinpointing the direction the sounds had come from before aiming into the darkness. Professor Kohaku appeared and saw that Scout was aiming at something but that there was no immediate threat. "I will stay concealed and try to keep the portal open while you three handle the situation," Professor Kohaku said. The girls gave their assent with a nod, an "alright," and an "okay." A second later, and Professor Kohaku had turned herself invisible.

"I'll sneak to the side. You draw its attention with your flashlights while I go to the other side and find Will and the others," Sands said as she pulled on the backpack containing all their water and snacks.

Scout looked away from the darkness for a second and leaned in to her sister's ear. "Come back."

"I'll do my best, but I have to get the victims out. Just...maybe don't kill it until I'm back or until Professor Kohaku has found another way to open the portal, just in case."

Koren finished setting up her PAWS recorder to scan the whole area without traveling through any holes in trees, hoping Professor Dare would be able to figure something out from the recording. Then she said, "Yeah, sure, contain the Stranger without killing it, we've got this." It was clear she was trying to appear more confident that she was—after all, she'd only been in one real fight against Strangers in the first Hunt, which had been cut short. Still, there was no time for Sands to say anything reassuring (not that Koren would have accepted it, anyway), so she just jogged off to the side.

When Sands was far enough away, Koren used her left hand to shine a flashlight in the direction Scout was aiming. Her right hand held one of her four-bladed Hunga Munga. The flashlight beam didn't travel far enough to illuminate the Stranger fully, but it did change the near-complete darkness to a patchwork of light and shadow, in which a vague shadowy figure rose from near the ground. That was



enough for Scout, who fired. Her first shot missed, as the Stranger happened to move out of the way, but the second one made contact in its shoulder region. The Stranger let out a cry that was just barely loud enough for Koren to hear. She shivered.

Scout fired again, this time specifically aiming for the shoulder to make sure she didn't hit anything vital. With another scream when it was shot a second time, the Stranger charged towards them. Scout fired again and again, careful not to hit anything vital, but as it came into the light, it became apparent that she probably didn't need to worry so much, as it was barely even bleeding. She shifted her fire to the bulkier chest area. With each shot that hit, the Stranger screeched louder and more blood came out, but it wasn't slowing down or turning away.

Koren placed the flashlight on the ridge of earth behind her so it continued to illuminate the charging Stranger and pulled her second four-bladed throwing axe into her left hand. She wanted nothing more than to throw her axes and keep the Stranger at a distance, but Scout only had her sniper rifle, which left Koren to tank. Koren resolved to have a *talk* with Sands when this is over, because they really should have taken each other's jobs. Then again, it was at least partially Koren's fault for being too tired to plan much before going to sleep.

Now that the Stranger had almost reached them, they could see what Nancy had meant with her "no face, but a mouth" description. Its head opened up, almost like a bunch of flower petals, if those petals had teeth. Scout swung her gun up to fire into its presumably vulnerable inner mouth, but with the Stranger this close, she panicked a little, and the shot went wide. Koren braced herself and swung her axes as hard as she could into the beast. They dug deep, drawing a loud scream, and gushes of blood, but Koren found herself barely able to hang on as several hundred pounds of monster slammed her several feet backwards, through a bush, and into the dirt slope behind them, knocking the flashlight away until it was pointing uselessly at a tree. Koren hurt everywhere, and she coughed up a little blood from what she was pretty sure was a broken rib, but the peridle healing would take care of it. She let out a cry of pain as the monster pulled itself back, forcing her to tense her muscles to

hold onto her Hunga Munga as they ripped out of its thick, leathery skin. The monster screamed at her, hideous toothy petals opening up to a cavity filled with slime. It reached for her with a clawed hand, but Scout had taken the opportunity to climb up to the top of the small ridge, giving her a clear vantage point to shoot its hand. It turned up to face her for a second, then turned and ran into the darkness.

Scout quickly crouched down at Koren's side. "Okay?" she asked, inwardly cursing herself for having such a difficult time even asking if her classmate was alright.

Koren coughed up a little more blood before answering. "Just a broken rib and a few other bumps and bruises. I'm not a wuss; I'll be alright." Then she coughed up a bit more blood. Scout raised her gun up into a ready position and peered into the darkness, listening as the Stranger walked quietly through the forest. If it came back, she'd be ready, but first she needed to check up on her sister. She triggered her communicator pin and asked, "Sands?"

Sands ran in the direction her sister had been aiming, keeping her flashlight aimed low to the ground to avoid attracting the Stranger's attention. She saw a blur run past her and ran towards where it came from. As she heard the gunshots and the Stranger's squeal of pain, she tried not to worry too much for Scout. Both she and Koren were training to be Heretics, but Sands still couldn't shake the feeling that it was wrong to leave her sister to be defended by Koren while she went on the safer mission. (She hadn't even considered sending Scout through the portal, since she was the most vulnerable of them in a straight-up fight, and the Stranger might come back while she was still in there.) The problem was that, no matter how much Koren rubbed her the wrong way, Sands couldn't bring herself to send the girl to potentially be trapped in some strange alternate world. It offended her sense of human decency, and also there was what Flick had recently learned about the girl to consider.

Luckily, it wasn't hard to find the slimy hole in a tree that the Stranger had clearly come out of. Sands pulled out her Construction Mace and gestured with it, creating inch-thick metal walls all the way around the portal and in through the hole in the tree. Obviously, there was some magic happening here, so a physical reinforcement

might not actually keep it from closing, but it probably couldn't hurt. Then, Sands pushed aside as much slime as she could, along with her disgust, and crawled through the hole. She was very thankful that she, unlike her sister and Koren, wore the pants version of the uniform, because she did *not* need to feel this slime on more of her skin than necessary.

Sands pulled herself to her feet and found herself in a cold, foggy version of the forest she came from, filled with strange, slimy-looking, root-like tendrils covering the trees and ground. There were ominous-looking spores floating through the air, which smelled and tasted weird as she breathed in. The peridle healing would probably take care of it if it was harmful, but she made a mental note to go to the medical center anyway when she was back at Crossroads. There was no telling what this stuff could do with prolonged exposure. She hoped Will and the others were alright, if they were even alive in here. It was time to start looking.

Sands had previously decided that it would probably be best to make her way to the Byers house and search from there. If Jonathan and his mom were correct, Will's last known location was his house, but in this world, before he apparently ran away from the monster, so that would likely be a good place to start.

She wasn't just forgetting about the other missing people, of course, but at least with Will, she had some evidence that he was still alive and in this place, so it made sense to start with him. "Will!" she yelled as she started walking. "Will Byers! Are you in here? I'm here to help! Your mom said she talked to you! Will, where are you?"

## 5. Rescue 2-02

### Chapter 5

It wasn't long before Sands heard her sister's voice over the communicator. "Sands?" That at least answered the question of if the magical communicator would work between realities at all. Of course, they still didn't know if it would work if the hole closed, but hopefully they wouldn't have to test that.

"Scout, I'm here. Are you and Koren alright?"

"Okay. Koren's hurt, but she'll heal. The Stranger ran off," Scout replied quietly.

"Is the hole still open?"

"Don't know. Can't check until Koren's better. The Stranger's still on this side."

"Okay. Let me know if anything changes."

A couple of minutes later, Koren had healed enough that she was no longer coughing up blood, and she was able to stagger to her feet. "Next time, we stay mobile," she said. "You've got that enhanced stamina, so run away if it gets too close, and I'll use my axes to distract it and teleport away before it gets me." Scout gave an affirmative nod. Koren picked up her flashlight, and they walked in the direction the Stranger had come from until they found the hole in the tree with Sands's metal brace around it. "We found the hole. Your metal has no signs of warping, so I don't think it has started closing at all."

"Good. Any sign of the Stranger?"

"Nope, haven't seen it."

"I hear it, but it's not close," Scout reported.

Koren noticed Scout glancing between where she stood, leaning on the tree for support as she continued healing, and the hole in the

tree. "Go ahead, help your sister search," Koren said. "I've got this." Oddly enough, even though she was healing injuries from the first time she fought the Stranger, Koren wasn't bluffing. Now that she had some idea of what it was capable of, she was sure that she could at least hold it off for a while if it attacked again.

Scout let her sister know she was coming and crawled through. On the other side, she found Professor Kohaku kneeling on the ground, examining the tree with the hole in it. A thin rope lay on the ground, forming a circle around the teacher. Kohaku looked up briefly as she heard Scout before returning to her work. "Move quickly. I don't think I can finish before the Stranger comes back."

Scout stood up. To her surprise, the other side of the hole was actually a bit brighter out, so she could possibly have scouted around with her rifle, but the fog and spores in the air combined with the darkness made the overall visibility even worse than in the normal world. Instead, she consulted her map and, using a flashlight for illumination, headed off in the direction of the Byers house to start her search from there like Sands was going to.

After a few minutes, Koren was only a little sore, her injuries completely healed otherwise. Her flashlight was off, allowing her to hold both axes and look at the darkness in every direction without ruining her night vision. However, standing here in the dark waiting for a monster was all too familiar of an experience for her. She tightened the grip of her slightly-trembling hands on her Hunga Munga and reminded herself that she was a Heretic now. She didn't need to be afraid of the monsters anymore now that she was training to kill them. Still, she was almost pathetically relieved when she heard Sands announce that she had arrived at the creepy version of the Byers house. The relief was immediately followed by annoyance at her own reaction, which she channeled into her speech. "Took you long enough. I was starting to think you'd forgotten where it was already. Now can you hurry things up? I'd like to actually use that room we rented for the night."

"Why don't you just...ugh, I'm too tired and busy to fight with you right now." Koren could hear Sands tamping down on her frustration. "We're lucky the layout of this place is the same as in the normal world. Seriously, this place is already disgusting and weird. It

wouldn't have surprised me if the geography was all messed up."

"At least if it had been different, Scout could actually live up to her name. Hey, why aren't you in the Exploration track, anyway?"

Of course, Sands answered for her sister, sounding half offended and half willing to carry on a conversation. The two of them continued in a similar vein for a while, alternating civil conversation with halfhearted verbal sniping. A few minutes later, Scout also found the Byers house and began her search outward from there, checking a different area than Sands was.

Eventually, Sands found a small wooden clubhouse. "Hey. I always sort of wanted one of these. Of course, we couldn't build one in the jungle on the island. That would've been way too dangerous, so we were stuck with pillow forts indoors."

"I made a treehouse with my dad out behind our house. It was awesome," Koren said smugly.

As Sands walked to the front of the little fort, ducked under the sign that said "CASTLE BYERS," and looked past the white sheet dangling in the entranceway, she saw a small boy curled up in the back corner. "I found him!" she reported. Then, she rushed forward, crouched down on her knees, and checked his breathing, letting out a sigh of relief when she saw his chest moving up and down. "He doesn't look good, but he's alive." She reached out and tried to get a good angle to pick up the emaciated boy, but as soon as she touched him, he jolted awake and curled up further into a ball in the corner, if that was even possible. Sands raised her hands and said, "Whoa, it's alright. I'm going to get you out of here." The boy uncurled himself a little, and the terrified look left his eyes. "You're Will Byers, right?"

"Yeah," Will croaked out with his parched throat. "How...are you here?"

Sands pulled her backpack off her back, unzipped it, and pulled out a bottle of water, which she unscrewed and handed to Will. "Here, drink this." Will's hands were shaking as he grabbed the bottle, but he managed to bring it to his lips and get at least half of the water into his mouth. Shining her flashlight in her pack, Sands started to pull

out some snacks as she answered his question. "We waited for the Stran—monster to try to hunt us in the forest, and when it came through, my...classmates distracted it so I could go back the other way and come find you." Will finished the water bottle and reached shakily for the granola bar in Sands's hand, but she pulled it back and dropped it in her backpack. She zipped the bag closed and swung it onto her back, saying, "Sorry, but we've gotta get out of here before the monster gets back. Koren's holding it off, but she won't be able to stop it for long. I'm gonna carry you, alright?"

"Don't think I can walk, anyway," Will said weakly.

Sands put one arm under his shoulders and one under his legs and lifted him up. She was a small girl, but she could bench-press 400 pounds, so she barely even felt like she was lifting him. Still, even her strength shouldn't have made him feel this light—he really needed to get some food in him. She stood up, carefully staying hunched to avoid hitting the roof, and made her way outside before setting off at a quick jog towards the portal.

It happened so fast. One moment, Koren was standing in front of the tree, scanning the darkness, Hunga Munga at the ready in her hands. The next moment, she heard a noise and saw a blur in her peripheral vision. Rather than stand her ground this time, she threw her left axe forward as hard as she could, letting out a scream of fright as she did. When it was about four feet away, she pressed the button on the handle of her other axe, teleporting to the first one. She could hear the Stranger rushing by behind her, so she whirled around, swinging the Hunga Munga at it, but was a little too slow to make contact. The Stranger whirled around, opened its mouth, and charged at her. She again threw her left axe and used her remaining axe to teleport to safety, this time about twenty feet away. She quickly alerted the others that they needed to hurry up and get back to the portal. The Stranger was still charging at her, so she threw her right axe and teleported away yet again.

This time, she stood her ground as the Stranger charged at her. Taking careful aim, she threw one of her axes at the beast's head as hard as she could. Unfortunately, its freaky mouth was closed as it ran, and the axe was deflected off the hard, angled skin of its head. Koren tightly gripped her remaining axe and stood in a ready stance.

The Stranger swiped at her with a clawed hand, trying to use its longer reach to its advantage, but Koren ducked under it and drove her axe into the Stranger's side. The force of the Stranger's charge made the axe cut deep, but it also knocked Koren off her feet. Before she could be crushed between the Stranger and the ground, she pressed the button that teleported her to her other axe, which lay out of harm's way in the bushes.

Unfortunately, this meant Koren was now in a bush. Cursing in annoyance at the scratches the various branches gave her, she hurled one of her Hunga Munga at a nearby tree. The blade bit into the bark, and she used the other axe to teleport to it. Her peridle healing was already fixing the scratches and the sore wrist she got from blocking the Stranger's charge, so she ignored them and turned to see where it had gone. She peered into the darkness, lit only by whatever light from the nighttime sky filtered through the tree branches, but could see nothing but indistinct shapes. The Stranger was either out of sight, or it had caught on that she couldn't tell it apart from the surroundings if it made no sudden movements.

Koren sheathed an axe and grabbed her flashlight with her left hand. Wary of missing the monster's approach by focusing too intently on one area, she left the light off as she looked around. Her heart pounded in her chest, fueled by fear long after she had caught her breath from the exertion. She spotted a sudden movement to her left and shined the flashlight that way, but there was nothing there. There was a rustle of leaves to her right, and she jumped, swiveling around to face that way. The rustling sound intensified, and she realized it was the wind blowing through the trees. Then the whole forest seemed to get darker.

"It was a cloud, genius," Koren admonished herself under her breath. "You got all freaked out because you saw the shadow of a cloud. Some Heretic you are." Then, she triggered her communicator and said out loud, "I lost it. It's still on this side of the portal, but I don't know where it went. I'll head back to the portal now." Then, she started to walk slowly backwards towards the portal, panning her flashlight across the forest around where she had last seen the Stranger. She knew she needed to get back to the portal, but she wasn't willing to turn her back on the Stranger.



Then, a horrible thought struck her. It couldn't have gotten behind her already, could it? An adrenaline rush sent her heart pumping as she whirled around to check behind her, but there was nothing there. She took deep breaths, trying to calm herself down as she turned back around. Then the beam of the flashlight revealed the Stranger standing **right there**. Koren let out a piercing scream, violently jumped a foot backwards, dropped her flashlight in shock, and swung her axe to block the claw reaching towards her. Her shock left the grip on her axe loose, and it was knocked out of her hand by the Stranger's arm. It reached for her with its other arm, and she avoided its grasp through the undignified means of falling to the ground.

"Koren! Are you alright?" Sands asked frantically through the communicator, but Koren had no attention to spare. Leaves crinkled as she scrambled backwards along the ground and reached for the axe at her belt. The Stranger easily kept pace. With a painful thud, Koren hit her head against a tree. She couldn't back up any more, and she had no time to go around; the Stranger was right in front of her, reaching down. She finally got a good grip on the axe at her waist, and before the Stranger could grab her, she teleported to her other axe. Picking it up, she threw it as hard as she could, waited for it to fly a decent distance, made it stop in midair, and teleported to it. She did this three more times until was a good distance away. With a tree at her back and a backup flashlight in one of her hands, she finally felt safe enough to reply to the communicator.

"I'm fine. It almost got me, but I got away. But...I'm sorry, but I got turned around in the fight. I have no idea where the portal is from here. There's just trees all around me."

"The important thing is that you're okay," Professor Kohaku said. "Don't you worry about the portal. Scout just went through to fight off the Stranger from your side. I'm still working on keeping the portal open, and while I don't think I'll be able to finish it quickly enough, I'm nearly certain that it's possible, so nobody is going to be trapped over here permanently."

Gunshots sounded through the forest. Koren's immediate response was to slump down to the ground in relief. She was safe. If the Stranger was trying to get past Scout and through the portal, then it wasn't hunting her anymore. Her breathing evened out and her

heartbeat slowed to a more normal rate as she calmed down.

After a couple of seconds, Koren rose to her feet and started to jog in the direction of the gunshots. "What's wrong with me?" Koren muttered to herself. "Oh, yay, the monster's attacking my classmate, not me. Yeah, she couldn't beat it before, but that's fine, as long as it's not attacking me I don't need to worry about it. What a bitch."

Koren arrived at the portal in time to see Scout shoot the feet of the Stranger as it crawled through the hole in the tree. She heard it screech in pain through the portal. Then, Professor Kohaku announced over the communicator, "The Stranger's back on this side. Sands, I sent it fleeing away from you, but you'd better hurry up. The portal's starting to close."

Hearing that, Scout put her massively oversized rifle into its far-too-small carrying case and crouched down to crawl through the hole again. "What are you doing?" Koren demanded. "It's not going to help anything to have *more* people stuck on the other side!"

"Scout, you'd better not be trying to join me!" Sands said in between heavy breaths as she carried Will at a run towards the portal. "Professor Kohaku's here. I'll be fine!"

"She's still going," Koren reported, feeling awkward. What was she supposed to do here? It was probably best just to let the sisters argue it out and let Scout make her own decision, but she couldn't deny that there was a part of her that just wanted to grab Scout by the ankles and drag her back to safety.

"Look, if the portal does close before I get there, somebody needs to draw out the Stranger again so I can get back out. You can't just leave Koren to fight it alone," Sands argued.

*Then what was that earlier?* Koren thought indignantly, but for once she held her tongue. She didn't want to get in the way of something that would get Scout to stay out in the normal world. Plus, as she thought about it more, she realized that earlier they hadn't known just how outclassed she would be in a one-on-one fight with the Stranger, and she had just been meant as a distraction anyway.

Scout lay still for a couple of seconds, partially inside the tree, before crawling back out, standing up, and saying, "Be safe." The two girls stood silently, one with a uniform and exposed skin covered in slime and dirt and one with small tears in her uniform, dirt all over her, and twigs and leaves in her hair. Before their eyes, the bark of the tree in front of them sealed up over the slimy portal, leaving no visible sign that it had ever existed.

## 6. Rescue 2-03

"Sands. Can you hear me? The hole just finished closing," Koren said into the communicator. Scout stood in front of her, waiting anxiously for a response.

"Yeah, I can hear you." Koren and Scout both let out sighs of relief.

"While I'm glad that the communicators still work, I'd be interested to hear what you plan to do now," Professor Kohaku said.

"Well, I guess we could try to lure it out again so it opens another portal," Koren said somewhat tentatively. She and Scout eyed the slime all over Scout and the dirt that covered them both. Lying down out here in the rough certainly wouldn't be the most pleasant option.

"No, you should go back to the motel, shower, sleep in a real bed. Somebody should get to," Sands said. "Besides, we should see if anybody else is still alive in here before the portal opens up again so we can get them all out."

"A shower sounds great to me!" Koren said. She looked to Scout, who held her gaze for a second before nodding.

Sands walked slowly and caught her breath as she finally let herself relax a little. There was no more need to run now that the portal was closed, but she did want to get to Professor Kohaku in case the Stranger found her. Sands was pretty confident in her own abilities, but not while carrying somebody in her arms.

"We're still trapped in here, aren't we?" Will asked weakly. The way the magical communicators worked, he was only able to hear Sands's side of the conversation, so he wasn't entirely sure what was going on.

"For now, but don't worry, we'll get out. Professor Kohaku's here; she'll find a way to reopen the portal to the normal world, or the monster will go hunting again, and we'll follow it out."

"But what if it hunts *us*?" Sands felt a shudder run through the boy.

She pulled him to herself more tightly (being careful not to squeeze too hard with her enhanced strength), and he snuggled into her arms, obviously craving warmth and human contact after nearly a week in this cold, dark, dreary place.

"I **promise** it's not going to get you," Sands said resolutely. The Bystander Effect would prevent her from explaining that she had a magic weapon and super-strength enough to bench press 400 lbs, so she'd just have to convince him he was safe through the strength of her conviction. "I'm taking you to the Head of Security at my school. This monster is nothing to her. She was standing right by the portal when my sister and our classmate chased it back through, and she sent it packing, no problem. And if it comes after me, I've got a mace and I've been training to fight monsters just like it. I'll kick its ass. You're safe now, I promise." With that, she gave a little reassuring squeeze.

Apparently, her little speech had worked. She could feel as Will relaxed and practically melted into her arms. A minute later, his breathing evened out, and she could tell he had fallen asleep. She was thankful for her inherited strength; even though Will was a small child emaciated by lack of food, he was also in middle school, and well past the age a petite girl like Sands could normally carry someone a significant distance.

Sands kept an eye out for the Stranger as best she could in this poorly-lit, creepy realm, but fortunately, she reached Professor Kohaku without incident.

"Miss Mason. I'm glad to see you and the boy are safe," Professor Kohaku said, looking up from where she was examining some spell work she had scratched into the ground.

"Yeah, me too." Sands distastefully eyed the ground, which was covered in slime and tentacle-like vines. "Will's sleeping, but I don't want to put him down on that. Please tell me you brought blankets."

"When I heard this would be a rescue mission, I quickly packed a number of essentials—food, water, medical supplies—and, yes, blankets." Kohaku clenched her fist. There was a brief flash of white light and a flare of heat. When Sands finished blinking the white

spots from her eyes, she could see that a circle six feet across had been sanitized. The slime was gone, and the tentacle-vines that had passed through the area had shriveled up and died. Meanwhile, Kohaku reached into the extradimensional storage space in her backpack and pulled out a blanket. "I've activated the spell on this blanket. It will work the same way as the temperature control from the shield over Crossroads. Will will be comfortable." Kohaku placed the blanket on the ground. Sands carefully got down to her knees and removed Will's arms from around her neck. As she gently placed him on the ground, he started to wake up. He started to squirm and clutch at her arms.

Sands could see the panic in his eyes, so she tried to reassure him. "It's alright, Will, you're safe. I'm just gonna lay you down here with Professor Kohaku." He calmed down a little, and she turned to the professor and asked, "Can you get him some food and water? I gave him a little before, but we didn't have much time."

"Of course." Kohaku pulled a granola bar and a bottle of water from her pack and gave them to the still-half-asleep Will, who downed them before going back to sleep. "I'll keep an eye on him while I continue to work on reopening the portal. You should go check for more survivors. You still have the distress beacon I gave you, right?"

"Yeah, I've got it." Sands got to her feet, pulled her flashlight and mace from their pouches on her belt, and headed out into the darkness.

Koren shifted uneasily in bed, trying to relax enough that she could get some sleep. She could hear the water running as Scout washed off the dirt and slime from crawling through the portal, but that wasn't why she couldn't fall asleep. No, she was just too agitated up from fighting the Stranger, from hunting the monster through the dark forest and being hunted in return.

She tried to remind herself that they were probably safe. Most of the Stranger's reported activity had been outside, specifically in the forest several miles from where they were staying. The chances that it would go outside its usual hunting range and into the second floor of a building just to go after them were incredibly slim, especially since last they had seen it, it had been injured and retreating to its layer to

heal. It had still been very dangerous, of course, and if Koren was being honest with herself, likely strong enough to kill both her and Scout if it had really wanted to. That said, they had hurt it, and it had seemed to prioritize retreating to its layer over finishing them off when it was injured, so there was no reason to think it would come after them now.

None of that reasoning got rid of the fear Koren felt. It was so damn annoying, too! Koren had thought that she would finally be able to grow up and be less afraid of the night now that she actually knew what monsters might be after her and was training to fight them, but if it was ever going to happen, it certainly hadn't happened yet. She had made sure to choose the bed closer to the window because she knew that hiding away from her ridiculous fears never helped them go away.

*Scratch.*

Heart pounding from the sudden rush of adrenaline, Koren threw the sheet out of her way, leapt to her feet, grabbed one of her Hunga Munga from the nightstand, and threw open the curtains. She found a window sealed tightly shut. On the other side, a tree branch moved gently with the wind, scratching against the glass. Koren just stood there and stared for a second, listening to the blood pounding in her ear. Then, she exclaimed, "Fuck it!" She wrenched open the window, pivoted on her heel, went back to the nightstand to grab her other axe, and returned to the window. Reaching out the window, she held her left-hand axe so the large curved blade was pointing at the back of the tree branch. Then, she pushed the button that would freeze the axe in midair. She swung at the branch with her other axe. Caught between her swinging axe and a sharp immovable object, the tree branch only lasted a couple of swings before Koren had cut all the way through it. It fell to the ground with a thunk.

Koren retrieved her floating weapon. Then, she turned around and saw that Scout had finished showering and entered the bedroom with a towel wrapped around her. "What are you looking at?" She demanded aggressively. Scout gave her a look that clearly conveyed how dumb a question that was when Koren was clearly doing something weird. "The tree was bothering me, so I cut it, alright? You have a problem with that?" Scout just looked at her silently for a long

moment before turning away to finish drying off and change into her sleepwear.

Shrugging off her classmate's judgment, Koren set down at the small table in the corner of the motel room, pulled a magical rag from her pack, and started cleaning her blades. Heretic weapons were tough enough that she didn't need to sharpen them, but her axes were still dirty from the tree sap. As the rag went over the blade, the sap disappeared entirely. She finished cleaning the blades and returned the rag to her pack. Then she stood up, walked over to the window to shut it, and returned her Hunga Munga to her nightstand.

By that point, Scout was finished changing. She walked over to the window and began using a field engraver to draw a spell on the windowsill. Koren walked over to examine the spell, but she didn't recognize it. "What spell are you using?" Koren asked.

Scout didn't respond for a while as she concentrated on drawing the spell properly. When she was finished, she looked up at Koren and said, "Intruders."

"It's an intruder alert? Just for this window, or what?" Scout shook her head and gestured around the entire room before heading to the door to enter the motel room and beginning to write more spell work. "So what, you put the spell on the entrances and it catches intruders anywhere in the room?" Scout nodded. "That's handy."

By the time Scout had finished inscribing the spell and imbuing it with enough power to last while they slept, Koren had returned to her bed. Scout put the field engraver away and went to her own bed. It wasn't too long before Koren was fast asleep. She was understandably tired, and now that she felt safe enough, it was no wonder she fell asleep easily. But at least Koren had gotten a few hours of sleep while they were waiting for the Stranger to attack. Scout had been awake the whole time, and even with her enhanced stamina, she was completely exhausted, but she just couldn't seem to let herself sleep. She wasn't afraid—she was worried.

Normally when one of the twins had trouble sleeping, they would just climb into the other's bed, but that was the whole problem—Sands wasn't there. Instead, she was away in that messed-up alternate



realm. Scout had known Risa Kohaku for her whole life, and she trusted her to keep her sister safe to the best of her considerable abilities, but she knew that even in what should have been safe circumstances, unexpected dangerous stronger than even what an adult Heretic could handle could pop up seemingly out of nowhere. She couldn't help but wonder if she had made the right decision by staying out here. Would she *really* be more help on the outside?

In the end, it didn't matter. The decision was already made, and Scout was exhausted enough that she eventually fell asleep.

For the first hour of her search, Sands had been constantly on-edge, waiting for the Stranger to jump out at her, but now she was just bored. Sure, this place was really disgusting, and the spookiness never stopped disturbing her a little, but mostly it was just empty of life. Well, okay, there were still plants and the vine things were everywhere. Sands had determinedly stayed away from a few of the tentacle-vines that were moving around a little or pulsing more than she was comfortable with, but other than those and the creepy spore-things floating in the air, nothing was moving. She could sometimes hear echoes of what people were saying in the normal world, although she had yet to determine a concrete pattern for where she heard them and where she heard nothing. Besides that and the quiet squelch of her footsteps, there was no sound.

Sands had grown up in a school next to a jungle, so there were always people around and jungle noises in the background. When she ventured into the jungle with her father, it was almost deafeningly loud, and even when her family left Crossroads, they rarely went somewhere quiet or empty, so the forest out in the normal world had already been oddly silent, but at least there the sounds of crickets and birds broke up the monotonous quiet of the night. Here there was none of that. She couldn't even pass the time by talking to Professor Kohaku, since she didn't want to disturb her attempt to develop a magical way to reopen the portal to the normal world.

Finally, as Sands started to approach this place's weird reflection of the town library, she noticed that the low pulsing sound a number of the creepy vines were making was getting louder. This whole place smelled bad—a dank, musty scent that reminded her of the worst smells of the jungle by her home combined with the rotting zombies

she had fought. The smell only got worse as she approached the library. She cautiously opened the door and made her way inside. The floors, ceiling, and walls of the library were even thicker with mucous and slimy tentacles than the insides of the other buildings Sands had checked. When she rounded a corner, she found a row of bodies on the floor. Choking down the nausea at the sight and smell of the dead bodies by reminding herself she had a job to do, she contacted Professor Kohaku over the communicator and told her that she had found them. Counting the number of bodies, she was able to confirm that it matched the number of disappearances.

The bodies looked and smelled disgusting. They were all covered in slime, and the oldest-looking ones had begun to rot. Several of these had slimy tendrils living in them, wriggling around. Even the body that looked least dead had a tendril going down its throat. Sands crouched down and checked its neck for a heartbeat, but found nothing. There was of course the possibility that the person could be resuscitated, but that was well beyond Sands's extremely limited medical knowledge. She'd have to return to Will and Kohaku so she could guard the boy while the professor came and figured out if there was anything she could do for these people.

As Sands stood up and turned to hurry away from the corpses before she actually did puke, she saw a gross tendril slithering on the floor right in front of her. She started in shock before bringing her mace down onto the tendril with considerably more force than was necessary to smash it. Her mace passed through the tendril and the slime it was crawling through with a squelch and crashed through the floor with a crunch before Sands caught herself and pulled it back up, leaving a hole in the floor. Unlike most times a Heretic killed a Stranger, Sands's aura didn't flare up, and she didn't feel the pleasure that accompanied the absorption of a new power. She had to assume it was just too weak.

Sands realized suddenly that a low rumbling sound she'd heard since entering the library had gone quiet. After a second of silence, there was an ominous growl. Shining her flashlight that direction, Sands could see the Stranger rising to its feet. There was no sign of the injuries Scout and Koren had inflicted on it earlier in the night.

Sands knew that whether or not she could defeat the Stranger, she

needed to relocate the fight in case the most intact-looking person on the floor could be saved, so she turned and bolted for the door. She passed through the doorway and then stopped, turned back, and used her construction mace to raise a steel wall on the Stranger's side of the doorway. It was charging at her, so she had to sacrifice strength for speed, making a thin wall that would cover the entire doorway. The Stranger crashed into it with a loud clang and a screech of tearing metal as it left dents in the shape of its head and upper body, and its clawed right arm tore straight through the metal. Sands swung her mace at the arm, but the Stranger pulled it back through the wall before she made contact. Her wall definitely wouldn't stand up to a second attempt to break through it, so Sands turned and sprinted out of the library. As she did, she activated her emergency beacon.

There was a loud screech of metal followed by pounding footsteps as the Stranger pursued her. She could hear that it had nearly caught her in the entrance way, so rather than take the time to open the front door, she swung her mace with all of her enhanced strength and smashed it open and jumped over the half-dozen steps down from the door. In front of her, she could see that Professor Kohaku had teleported to the front of the library in response to her signal. The dampness of this strange world was starting to rise up from the ground in a way Sands recognized, so as she landed from her jump, she tucked herself into a roll, leaving a clear shot for the spear of ice Kohaku launched at the Stranger with a gesture. The creature let out a cry of pain. When Sands stood and turned to look back inside, she saw that the Stranger had been knocked back across the entrance way of the library, although the ice spear had cracked into several pieces rather than penetrate its tough hide.

"You should return to Will in case there are more Strangers in here than just the one large one and those little tentacles," Kohaku said. "But first, where are the victims?" Sands described how to get to the room with all the bodies before heading off.

Sands didn't have to wait long after reaching Will's sleeping body (which was protected by a magic circle Kohaku had inscribed in the ground) before the Professor returned with bad news. "None of the other victims survived."

Sands stayed quiet for a moment to respect the dead. Then, she asked, "What about the Stranger?"

"It's still out there somewhere. It fled, and I prioritized checking on the victims. I could possibly hunt it down, but I am the Head of Security, not the Hunter or Investigation Tracks. Besides, this is a class assignment, so while I will not allow it to harm anybody else, I will allow you and the others to handle it. But first, I need to find a way to get back to the normal world so we can get Will to safety and your classmates can get here to assist you."

"We should go back for the bodies. Nobody deserves to have those things crawling in their body after they die, and their families will need closure. That's much easier with a body," Sands said quietly.

"I have already taken care of it," Professor Kohaku said, patting her backpack (and the extradimensional storage space within). "Now that there is nothing you need to do immediately, you should probably try to get some more sleep." Sands somewhat reluctantly had to agree. Kohaku handed her another blanket. She laid it down next to Will on the relatively clean ground around him, lay down on top of it, wrapped it around her, and tried to get comfortable enough to fall asleep. It was hard—this place was the embodiment of creepy darkness that it's hard to sleep in, and she didn't have her sister there to support her through her fear and discomfort like she was used to—but the combination of her exhaustion and her repeated reminders to herself that Professor Kohaku was right there to keep them safe eventually allowed her to fall asleep.

## 7. Men in Black 3-01

### Chapter 7

A/N: Wow, this chapter gave me just the worst case of writer's block I've had for this story. Partly because we're returning to *Stranger Things* characters after so long with the Heretics only, and partly because we're going back from a simple rescue mission/monster hunt plot to a more complicated mystery/intrigue plot with lots of actors. Plus, I always feel horribly awkward writing any sort of romance, but it's impossible to write Nancy and Steve without some of it, especially when they woke up in the same bed. I hope it comes across in-character and isn't too cringe-worthy (except in the good way that all romance is).

One of my favorite things to compare in these two stories is the protagonists' attitudes towards sharing information. Flick makes a point to share information as much as she safely can (although she has to work at it at times), while a lot of the tension in *Stranger Things* came from the fact that all the information was known by *somebody*, but the various groups of heroes weren't talking to each other until the end.

As Nancy Wheeler awoke for what felt like the hundredth time that night, the first thing she noticed was that she was uncomfortably warm. She moved to brush her quilt off her shoulders so she could cool off and try to go back to sleep again, but she stopped suddenly when she felt something quite different from a quilt. A soft snore confirmed what she was only just then remembering—Steve Harrington was in her bed.

Nancy opened her eyes. The room was still well-lit from all the lights she had left on when she went to sleep. Faint hints of the dawn's light peeked through the drapes shut over the window at the head of her bed. She carefully removed Steve's arm from her shoulder and reached up to pull the drapes open. To her relief, the sun had barely risen—it was still early. Still, the sun was up, which meant she no longer had to try to ignore the image of the monster she saw every time she closed her eyes. She hadn't slept much, but she was tired of

trying. She turned back to Steve and gently shook him awake.

When Steve had blinked the sleep from his eyes and realized where he was, a smile spread across his face. "Good morning, beautiful," he murmured, sitting up and giving Nancy a kiss. They pulled apart, and Nancy couldn't help but smile.

"Good morning," Nancy said softly. Before she could say more, Steve leaned forward and caught her lips with a quick peck, and then another. This last kiss deepened for a couple of seconds before Nancy pulled away, put her hands between them, and pushed Steve back slightly. Refusing to let herself be distracted by Steve's bare chest on her hands, Nancy said firmly, "You need to go. You can't be here when my mom wakes up."

Steve started to object, but Nancy caught her eyes with his, and he could see in her gaze just how serious she was. "Yeah, okay." He pulled away, stepped out of bed, and retrieved his clothes from the floor. As he pulled his pants on over his boxers, he said, "So, I can come back in a couple of hours once breakfast is over. I'll pick you up. We can go for a drive?"

"No, I...I'm not feeling up to going out right now, with everything that's going on."

Steve pulled his shirt over his head and sat down with his legs hanging off the side of Nancy's bed. "Nancy, don't shut me out!" He said quietly, but emphatically. "I get it, you didn't want to talk last night. You were worn out and didn't want to do anything to sleep. Whatever. Fine. But now it's the next day, and I think I deserve some answers. What's going on with you?"

Nancy considered what to say. A big part of her wanted to trust Steve and just tell him what was going on, but then she remembered that Jonathan hadn't even believed his own mother when she told him she had seen a monster. How could she expect her boyfriend to believe her? The thing that had finally convinced Jonathan was Nancy's independent account, but trying to use something Jonathan Byers had said to back up her story would **not** go over well with Steve. She could show him the picture Jonathan had gotten of the monster, but it wasn't a very good picture, really, and the questionable

circumstances in which he had taken the picture were what had caused the problem between Jonathan and Steve in the first place! No, the only good solution was to leave Steve out of it.

"I just need more time to deal with everything."

"That's not fair! I come over here to check on you and stay the night just to make sure you're comfortable, and you won't even talk to me!"

"I'm glad you were here last night, but I didn't ask you to come here."

"No, you just asked me to stay!" They glared at each other for a few seconds until, finally, Steve backed down. "Fine! I've got better things to do than listen to you mope all day anyway," he spat out bitterly. He made one final check to make sure he had all his things before starting to climb out the window. "I'll see you at school on Monday. Maybe then you'll be willing to talk to your boyfriend."

"Steve..." Nancy called after him, but he pointedly ignored her as he lowered himself to the ground and then headed off down the street at a jog. She stared after him for a minute, replaying the conversation in her head and trying to figure out how it could have gone better. Finally, she gave it up as a waste of time and grabbed a book on animals. She flipped to the predator section, an idea forming in her brain. She and Jonathan had encountered the monster when it had come to eat a deer that had been hit by a car, but it had gone after live humans, not recently dead ones, so it was more of a predator than a scavenger. It seemed to hunt at night, and alone. The book confirmed a fact Nancy vaguely remembered—sharks were attracted to blood. They could detect it in one part per million and smell it from a quarter mile away. Barb had cut herself before she was attacked, and the deer had been bleeding heavily when the monster found it—maybe the monster was attracted to blood as well. And if it was, they could lay a trap for it. She couldn't deny that she was terrified of encountering it again, but she refused to leave Barb and Will, her friend and Jonathan's brother, trapped in that place. At least if they prepared ahead of time, they could be ready for it. And maybe they wouldn't be totally unprepared—hadn't Scout had a massive rifle last night? Sands had given her the address, phone number, and directions to the motel where they were spending the night, so she'd have to go ask the girl for help.

But first, Nancy wanted to meet up with Jonathan. Not for the first time, she wished Hawkins would get with the times and install cell towers, but until it did, she was stuck using landline phones. Unfortunately, the Byers's home phone had been blown up, apparently by Will or the monster messing with the light and power to the house from that other place. With distance communication not an option, Nancy would have to walk. She dressed in practical clothes, and, careful she didn't wake anyone, headed downstairs. There, she grabbed a quick bite to eat, intentionally leaving a mess at her seat on the table to make it clear that she had, in fact, gotten home that night and eaten breakfast in the morning, and headed out to the Byers house.

Jonathan Byers woke to the sound of voices in the kitchen. He walked blearily in there to find his mom and Jim Hopper, the police chief of their small town, cleaning up their breakfasts and finishing their cups of coffee. They were clearly dressed and ready to head out as soon as they were finished.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Jonathan..." his mom started in a placating tone.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"Don't go sticking your head in where it doesn't belong," Hopper said, his voice gruff.

"Like hell it doesn't belong!" Jonathan burst out. "Will's my brother, and if you're doing something to get him back, I should be a part of it!"

Joyce Byers put down her coffee, took a step closer, and gripped Jonathan's hand in both of hers. "Jonathan, honey, this is all really dangerous, and I don't want you to get mixed up in it. Will's already missing; I couldn't stand if something happened to you too."

Jonathan could barely contain his frustration. This was why he hadn't said anything about his adventure last night. His mom would freak out if she knew what kind of danger he'd been in, and he didn't want her to worry. But still... "If whatever you're doing is so dangerous, at



least tell me where you're going so I know what happened to you if you don't come back."

A complicated range of facial expressions ran over Joyce's face. Then, she abruptly took Jonathan's face between her hands. "I need you to promise me that you're not going to run off and do something stupid."

"Okay, okay! I promise, I won't do anything stupid because of whatever you tell me! I promise."

"Joyce, I don't think this is a good idea," Hopper said.

"He's right. He deserves to know," she said firmly. They stared each other down for a few seconds before Hopper nodded his acceptance of her decision.

"He's your son," he said softly.

"So what is it?" Jonathan asked. "Where are you going? What did you find out about whatever took Will?"

"We still don't know where Will is, but we do know who faked the body," Joyce started to say before Hopper interrupted.

"You said 'what,' not 'who.' I thought you didn't believe your mom. What changed your mind?"

Jonathan threw him a pained look, ashamed of himself for not believing his mom. As he did, he thought of how to answer the question. This would be the perfect opening to bring up his and Nancy's encounters with the monster, but he was afraid it would convince his mom the situation was too dangerous and make her stop talking, so he kept quiet on that topic for now. "I didn't, but after finding out the body in Will's grave wasn't...wasn't Will, I thought maybe she was right about everything." He turned his head slightly to face his mom again. "Who faked the body?"

"It was the government. And yes, I know how that sounds, but a state trooper 'found' the...the **thing** they said was Will, and someone from the state took over for the autopsy."

"I talked to the trooper who said he found the body," Hopper said.

"He said he found it on his usual patrol route, but the quarry is private property; he had no reason to be there. I went and checked the body, found out it was fake. So I broke into the lab to look for him, but they caught me and knocked me out."

"Hold on. The lab?"

"Yeah, Hawkins National Laboratory? The Department of Energy lab not too far from here?"

"No, I know what it is. Why did you break in? Do you think *they* have Will?"

"I thought they might. We found some clothing scraps by a pipe leading into the lab when the search party was looking for Will, so me and the boys went down to the lab to have a look around, look at the security footage, but I could tell they were lying to us. They showed us footage from the wrong day. I knew the government was faking Will's death, so it was the obvious place to look, but they weren't going to stop lying if I went back, so I broke in. I didn't find Will, but I did find a huge...hole. Gate. *Opening*. They had the room quarantined, and there were seeds floating in the air and unnatural vines growing over the walls."

"Wherever Will is, **that** is how we can get there! I *saw* him in the wall, which was like...was like a *window*, and Hopper found the door!" Joyce said, gesticulating to emphasize her points.

"But before I could go through, they knocked me out," Hopper said. "Next thing I knew, I was on my bed at home. They poured beer on my shirt, tried to convince me it was all a drunken hallucination. But I looked around and found a mike. They bugged my home. They bugged your home too. There was a microphone in the lights!"

"So that's why the Christmas lights are all unscrewed," Jonathan realized aloud.

"Yes,' Joyce confirmed. "But you see, this is why I don't want you getting involved in this! The government is covering it up, and I can't let them hurt you!"

Jonathan stood up and started to pace in agitation. "That's where

you're going, isn't it? You're going back to the lab to go through the door and look for Will! You know they've got to be watching out for you to break in again. That's insane! And you were worried about **me** doing something stupid!"

"Sit down," Hopper said. Jonathan ignored him and continued to pace, trying to think of a way to stop his mom and Hopper from getting themselves arrested by the shadowy government conspiracy. He realized he'd have to tell them what he and Nancy had found. It wasn't safe, with the monster nearby, and the hole in the tree wasn't even open anymore, but it had to be a better option than getting arrested by the government.

"Sit down!" Hopper said more authoritatively. This time, Jonathan did as he said, taking his seat at the table. "No, we're not going back to the lab. Not yet at least. I found something else in the lab: a kid's room. There was a drawing in it, and your mom tells me that Will's a good artist."

"Yeah, he's pretty great," Jonathan agreed.

"Well, she showed me one of his drawings, and it's much better than the one I found in the lab. Somebody else drew it. Which means they had another kid locked up in there.

"The day after Will disappeared, Benny Hammond killed himself. He was seen that day with a kid, about Will's size, but the witnesses didn't think it was Will. They also thought it didn't make sense that Benny had killed himself. Suicides can take people by surprise, but given the circumstances, it's suspicious. I think this kid snuck out of the lab, tore some of their clothes on the pipe on the way out, then went to Benny's diner for some food. The government was following the kid, and they probably killed Benny, tried to pass it off as a suicide."

"Okay, that sucks, but what are we going to do? It's not like we have any proof. You don't know where the kid is now, do you? Does this just add another missing kid on top of Will and Barbara?"

"You aren't going to do anything. *You* are going to stay safe," Joyce said.

"Oh, alright," Jonathan said in the kind of sardonic tone only a teenager can summon. "What are you and Mom going to do?"

"I found in the old newspaper records that the laboratory was probably doing some shady experiments a little over ten years ago. Project MKUltra, the CIA's mind control experiments, were rumored to have continued long past when they were officially supposed to end. The rumors say Hawkins National Laboratory was involved. Terry Ives claims that she was part of these experiments and that the government stole her daughter. We're going to go talk to her, see what she knows."

Jonathan didn't hesitate. "I want to come with."

"Jonathan..." Joyce started in a pained voice.

"I want to come with."

"The only reason we told you all this was so you'd know how dangerous it is and **stay out of it**," Hopper growled.

"I still want to come with. I'm not going to go break into the lab looking for Will, but going to talk to this woman sounds a lot safer than that! Hell, she's told her story publicly, and they haven't done anything to her! I should get to help figure out what's going on!"

"Jonathan..." Joyce said again, her voice exasperated.

"He's got a point," Hopper said gruffly. "They seem to be leaving her alone. At worst, they'll be watching her and see us talking to her, but if they left her alone when they went public..."

"Maybe they left her alone *because* she went public," Jonathan realized. "Too many people had heard of her, so they could just throw her in jail forever or something without people finding out what they were doing. As long as they left her alone, she just sounded crazy."

"You're right," Hopper said. "They tried to convince me I was crazy instead of just throwing me in solitary or killing me like Benny. Probably because I'm the sheriff, and it would be extra suspicious if I disappeared. But you'd be just another kid disappearing. The pattern's already getting suspicious, but covering up the last few

disappearances hasn't drawn attention, so they'll do it again. It's still not safe for you."

Jonathan wanted to protest that his mom was in just as much danger as him, but he could tell that line of argument wasn't going to get him anywhere, so he didn't voice the thought. But the talk of publicity reminded him of something. "If going public worked for Terry Ives, maybe we should do the same thing."

"Already thought of that, kid. Wouldn't work," Hopper said. "Well, maybe your mom could pull it off. She's already got half the town convinced she's...well, you know..."

"Crazy?" Joyce spat.

"Yeah. So she might be safe like Ives, but it also means nobody will listen to her if she tries talking to a reporter or something. Now, they might listen to *me*, but I think it's more likely they'd think I'm crazy too, and there goes all my credibility as police chief. That and we don't know who's trustworthy or not in the media. We could try to go public and end up telling one of their stooges how much we know."

"What if I already knew a trustworthy reporter? I met some last night, and they already believed everything I told them so far. The only issue is, they're working for a high school newspaper, not a real company. But still, they heard about what was going on out here, so they're obviously well-connected, and it's gotta be better than nothing, right?"

"No! Absolutely not!" Joyce said. "We're not bringing more kids into this!"

"We're not bringing them in! They came here all on their own, and if we don't tell them more, they're going to keep searching until they stumble on the danger themselves!" The argument went back and forth a few more times, but in the end, Joyce and Hopper had to agree that Jonathan had a point. Since the Byers's telephone was still broken, they got into Hopper's truck and set out.